

THE QUEER CUSTOMER.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

In a shabby little shop in a shabby little street, a man sat stitching away as if for dear life, by the light of a single candle. The name of John Todd was over the door, and John Todd himself it was who sat upon the shopboard, keeping time to his nimble needle with an occasional snatch of a song. If there had been a song of the trousers, as well as of the shirt, he might with great propriety have sung that, for it was on a pair of those garments that he was employed. As it was, however, he did not confine himself to any one particular melody, but sang a verse of one and then a verse of another, as the fancy took him. Immediately above him hung a disreputable-looking old blackbird in a wicker cage, who listened to the performance with an air of grave attention, as one who was qualified to be critical, and occasionally gave an encouraging chirp of applause. The singer was a merry little man, no longer young, but still lithe and active, with twinkling gray eyes and a cheery smile which it was pleasant to look upon.

On the present occasion he had just got through "Lock o' Hazeldean," and the "Banks of Allan Water" (which the blackbird applauded immensely), and had begun "Mary of Argyle," when the shop door suddenly opened, and pulled him up short in the very middle of a very effective shake. The person who entered was a short, stout individual, with his hat very far back on his head, a notebook in his ear, and a parchment-covered notebook in his hand.

"Well, Mr. Todd," said he, showing the white end of a stumpy pencil, "ready for me, I suppose."

"The little tailor's cheerful countenance fell, as he replied:— 'I'm very sorry, Mr. Sprague, but I'm—the fact is—I can't say I am quite ready to-night.'"

"Then, why the deuce ain't you ready?" anxiously inquired Mr. Sprague, tapping the floor viciously with his fat cotton umbrella. "You're awfully sorry, I suppose, that to-morrow's Christmas day, and you're not ready to go to work, and you're not ready to go to work, and you're not ready to go to work."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Sprague," said John Todd humbly. "But which way I am to turn to find the money, the Lord only knows!"

"You'll turn out, Mr. Todd, if you don't find it." And with a coarse laugh at his own wit, Mr. Sprague departed.

Poor Todd looked much depressed. After a few minutes he unconsciously commenced "The harp that once through Tara's halls," but the attempt was a failure. Even the blackbird turned his back in disgust, and after a few bars John gave it up, and stretched away in sorrowful slumber. He might have remained so for perhaps half an hour, when the door again opened, and a little old lady in a black bonnet and cloak, and a basket on her arm, and a muff nearly as large as herself, peeped in.

"Do I intrude, Mr. Todd? Ah! quite by yourself. Dear me!"

"Yes, Miss Pinnifer, for want of better company, quite by myself."

"Ye-es," said Miss Pinnifer. "And very busy, see. Always busy! Coat, I presume."

"No, ma'am, trousers," said John Todd.

"Oh!" said Miss Pinnifer, with a little scream, and covering her eyes with her hand. "Very indiscreet of me—I beg pardon, I'm sure."

"Don't mention it, ma'am!" replied John gallantly. "It's of no consequence. Yes, I am rather busy, Miss Pinnifer. They're for a Mr. Brown—an old gentleman who came in last Thursday. He ordered a suit of blacks, and said he'd fetch 'em himself this evening, and I'm a little behind, you see."

"Ye-es!" Miss Pinnifer had a habit of saying "Ye-es," when spoken to, irrespective of anything in particular. She used the word to indicate various shades of feeling, but in a general way it was expressive of a mild surprise and admiration which encouraged the speaker to proceed. Mr. Todd proceeded accordingly.

"I hope he won't come just yet, for I've got nigh on two hours' work to finish the job. He's a queer customer, very. Never saw him before in my life, and he comes and sits down in that very chair, and talks and asks questions as if he had known me ever since I was so high! All about the children and Milly and everybody—"

"Strange!" said Miss Pinnifer. "Can it be? Yes, that must be it!"

"Eh?" said Mr. Todd, inquiringly.

"Now, mark me," said Miss Pinnifer, laying a rather bony finger impressively upon the queer customer's trousers. Mr. Todd marked her accordingly. "Did he ask anything about me?"

"I don't remember that he did," replied Mr. Todd.

Sunday. I thought at the time it was only rudeness, but no doubt he had his instructions. At this moment the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the queer customer himself. He was an elderly gentleman with a rufous complexion, and a very good-natured expression of countenance, and certainly did not look like a detective. As he entered the shop, Miss Pinnifer dropped her veil, and drawing herself up to her full height of four feet six, faced the intruder with excessive dignity. The stranger politely raised his hat to the lady, and then turned to John Todd.

"Well, Mr. Todd, and how do you do to-night? Am I too early for my little matter of business?"

"Well, sir," said Mr. Todd, "I won't say but what I'd rather you'd have come an hour later. The coat and waistcoat have been done some time, but the trousers—(Mr. Todd remembered the modest presence of Miss Pinnifer)—the other garments are not quite finished."

"Never mind, Mr. Todd, it's of no great consequence. I'm in no especial hurry. But I'm going to ask you a favor. I shall surprise you now, I dare say."

Poor Todd was so bewildered by the remarkable communication just made to him by Miss Pinnifer, coupled with the singular present appearance of that lady (she was standing with one foot advanced, her eye steadily fixed on the stranger, and held her muff across her chest, in a kind of boxing attitude), that he knew not what to answer, and could only reply confusedly.

"Don't mention it."

The stranger, answering rather the spirit than the letter of his words, continued— "To-morrow's Christmas day. For twenty years past I've been a wanderer on the face of the earth, and this is the first Christmas day, during all that time, I've spent in England. I've no friends, not so much as a dog or cat, and I don't like the idea of spending Christmas by myself. Will you let me take possession of you, Mr. Todd? You've a Christmas tree, and I've a notion I could enjoy Christmas very well in your company. Will you take possession of a lonely old man, and let him spend to-morrow with you and your family?"

John Todd was in much perplexity. His wits were felt for the lonely stranger, by whose frank address he was much surprised. On the other hand, there was Miss Pinnifer's statement, and John could not quite get rid of a vague apprehension that the stranger might, if admitted, take advantage of an unguarded moment to handcuff the family all round, and bear them away to perpetual imprisonment; last but not least, was the consideration that the lady was by no means sumptuously furnished, and that the Christmas fare was likely to be of an especially meagre description. The last reflection dictated his reply.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't see how I can be of any use to you, unless you'll let me be of use to you. I don't see how I can be of any use to you, unless you'll let me be of use to you."

"And hearty good-fellowship is the very best dish at the Christmas feast," said the stranger. "Beef and pudding are not to be despised, but they're only secondary, after all. Well, you haven't said 'no,' so I shall consider myself accepted. I've dined off a baked potato before now, and I shall find enough to eat, never you fear. What's your time? One o'clock—very good."

"This lady and her brother reside in the house, sir, and they were going to club their Christmas dinner with ours, if you have no objection."

"Objection! I, my dear Todd? You forget that I'm only a visitor. Objection! certainly not. The more the merrier, I say. Madam, my most obedient."

Miss Pinnifer relaxed so far as to courtesy with dignity, still, however, keeping her muff available for defense, if necessary.

"Well, that's settled," said the stranger. "And now I've got some little matters of business to attend to, so I'll wish you a good night. Good evening, madam. Don't distress yourself about the trousers, Mr. Todd."

With these words the unknown departed, leaving Mr. Todd and Miss Pinnifer dumb with amazement. The latter recovered her speech first; with the observation, "Did you ever?" Mr. Todd looked at her for a few moments. At last he ejaculated, slowly and distinctly, "No, I never."

"What a very singular person, Mr. Todd! You're quite sure you've never seen him before?"

"Never to my knowledge till the other night," said Mr. Todd.

"There's more in this than meets the eye," said Miss Pinnifer.

"You still think, ma'am—"

"If he isn't a detective, what can he be? He came here for?" said Mr. Todd. "It's a queer customer, very. Never saw him before in my life, and he comes and sits down in that very chair, and talks and asks questions as if he had known me ever since I was so high! All about the children and Milly and everybody—"

"Strange!" said Miss Pinnifer. "Can it be? Yes, that must be it!"

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"I don't remember that he did," replied Mr. Todd.

stranger; quite the gentleman, too, I can tell you. "But what makes him want to come here, then, father?"

"Well, my dear, that's more than I can tell you, except that he said he was a stranger and had no friends, and that he thought from my face that he could spend a merry Christmas here. That's all nonsense, of course; but the long and the short of it is, he's coming."

"Nonsense, indeed, for anybody to like my dear old father's face," said Milly, kissing him. "It's handsomer than half the young ones now, and I like the gentleman for saying it. No friends! that's very sad. Poor old gentleman, I'm very glad he's coming; but I wish we had a little more to give him."

"That's where it is, Milly; so do I; but we must make the best of it. What have you got?"

"Well, father, I've a nice bit of beef, and Miss Pinnifer is going to bring some sausages. I'm going to make a pudding, but it'll be only a kind of a make-believe to please the boys. They wouldn't believe it was Christmas, you know, without the pudding. It isn't much of a dinner to set before a visitor, father."

"Never mind, my dear," said her father, "I wish it was more; but we must make it do. Make the pudding as good as you can. Let me see. I know I haven't much in my pocket—only eightpence. Well, my dear, every little helps. I shan't want my half-pint of beer to-night."

"Dear old father! No, no; you're not going without your supper, sir, I can tell you, for any amount of grand visitors. I buy what I can do. I've got a crown up my sleeve, with a matter, and that will help us out capitably."

With a bright smile, though with a little choking at the throat (for the half-crown had been saved by pennies to buy a necktie for a certain Charley Collins, whose acquaintance we shall make by-and-by), Milly rose to seek her hoard; but her father stopped her.

"No, no, dear, keep your money, we may want it worse before the week's out. I didn't have it's best told after all."

Having taken the plunge, John proceeded to his daughter's room, and contemplated it with silent astonishment. "Who can it be from?" said Milly, a little indignantly. "I wonder what's in it?" said John Todd. "I hope it's something to eat, said Tommy Todd, an epicure of nine. Willie Todd, aged six, sucked his thumb and said nothing. Probably he thought the more."

"Hadin't you better open it, and then you'll know all about it," said John Todd.

"Dear old father," said Milly; "he's always right. So we will."

John Todd, junior, produced a knife, and the hamper was speedily opened. The first glance revealed nothing but straw, and the hearts of the youthful Todds sank almost to zero. But the straw was quickly removed, and then was revealed, first a most remarkable turkey—a turkey, if possible, inconceivably stouter, with a red ribbon round its neck and a rosette on its breast. Second, a roasting pig, which for size and fatness might have been brother, or cousin at least, to the turkey. I don't suppose there ever was a roasting pig quite as broad as he was long; but if ever there was such a pig, that was the one. Last, and not least, which it is only necessary to say that he did no discredit to the turkey and the pig. Before the party had recovered from their delight and surprise, the door again opened and another man, bearing another hamper, came in. "Name of Todd here?" said the man. "Right; with Mr. Brown's kind regards, and paid."

The door had hardly closed upon the porter when the youthful Todds, regardless of the "Glass, with care," in large letters on the top of the basket, rushed at it, and had it open in a trice. A fragrant smell arose from it, proceeding from sundry whitey-brown paper parcels arranged in trim order within. Milly counted them. One was found to contain currants, another plums, another spice in fine, all the ingredients for a momey pudding of the richest character were there. A noble packet of tea was the next thing that came to hand, and then a goodly store of apples, oranges, nuts, almonds, and raisins. When these were removed there was still a layer of something solid at the bottom of the basket, which, being investigated, proved to consist of a splendid plum-cake, and bottles of brandy, gin, and rum, with one of ginger wine. The little Todds executed a *pas de all sorts round the hamper in a perfect ecstasy of delight, and Milly and her father, though less demonstrative in their transports, were hardly less excited. Before they had recovered from their fresh surprise a softening was heard outside the door, as if something was being rubbed against it. Milly opened it, and found outside a boy, whose face was just visible over an enormous bundle of holly and mistletoe. He struggled into the shop with his burden. "Please 'm, Mr. Brown's compliments, and thought you might like a little holly and mistletoe for the Christmas decorations. Oh, my! ain't it prickly neither." Whereat he dropped it in a heap on the floor and disappeared.*

"Now, father dear," said Milly, "you had better shut up the shop, I'm sure you won't be able to do any more work to-night. Isn't it wonderful? Just like a fairy tale!"

"And Mr. Brown's the good fairy!" said John Todd. "Isn't he a noble gentleman? Well, I think I'll shut up, dear. He said he wasn't in a hurry for the things, and I don't feel as if I could bring my mind down again to trousers to-night."

"That's a dear old daddy," said Milly. "And now then you shall have your beer and your pipe, and sit in the corner, and see us put up this lovely holly. Isn't it beautiful? What a dear old gentleman Mr. Brown must be! I declare I quite love her already."

"Hollo!" said Mr. Todd, "what'll Charley Collins say to that?"

Milly rushed at him, and shut his mouth with a kiss.

"Be quiet, do, you wicked old man, that's quite a different thing, you know it is." And she forthwith began, with the assistance of her brothers, to decorate the homely room with the Christmas evergreens. It was worth a day's pay to anybody (say the Lord Chancellor) as his wages are tolerably good to see Milly's little figure stepping, from chair to chair, or standing like a lively little statue, on the ricketiest of tables, her arms held high above her head, and her dainty little white fingers flashing among the dark-green holly, and deftly insinuating sprigs of mistletoe into awful places where nobody would expect

them. And when at last, having hung holly and mistletoe in all possible, and two or three impossible, places, she sprang lightly to the floor, with her sunny face flushed, and her hair the least bit tumbled by her exertions, and led out her father by both hands for the first kiss under the mistletoe, I don't wonder that the boys hurried—I believe I should have done it myself under the same circumstances. I'm afraid, by-the-way, that I've done those same boys great injustice. It may possibly be imagined, as I have not chronicled their remarks, that they were silent. O dear, no! Quite the reverse. The fact is, they not only all three talked at once, but they all talked the whole time, with an effect which it is easy to imagine, but exceedingly difficult to describe. Had Providence made me three first-rate short-hand reporters, instead of only one gentleman of medium size, I might have attempted it, though even then I (we, I should say) should have found much difficulty by reason of the idiomatic nature of the young gentlemen's conversation. The number of "golly" and "crikey" with which it was embellished, I regret to say, much above what is considered correct in polite society, and (like the organ-man's monkey, who never would dance but to the genteel tunes) I find I never can spell those vulgar words. At last the merry party retired to rest, the boys to dream of roast pig, and Milly of—Well, never mind, we won't intrude, but don't you wish you were Charley Collins?

Christmas morning came at last, as if generally will, if you only wait long enough; and a very respectable sort of Christmas morning it was. Bright and clear and cold, with the snow on the ground crisp and hard, the sort of weather that makes one wish one was on a good long slide; the sort of weather that makes you button up your great-coat to the chin, and case your hands in your thickest woollen gloves; the sort of weather (I hope that makes you give a kindly thought to your poorer brothers who have no great coats to keep them warm) and no warm gloves to cover their frost-nipped hands, the sort of weather that makes you leap the blazing fire, do honor to the dainty cheer and pass round the rare old wine. But little they know of Christmas who think to win its magic gifts of light and life and joy by such means only. A single spark, lit by your bounty in a poor man's hovel, shall shed a warmth that the roaring fire in your own mansion cannot give—a warmth that goes straight to the heart. The frugal meal, spread by the rich man in the poor man's home, shall bring to the giver a sweeter sense of enjoyment than the most sumptuous banquet spread for self alone.

Happy he who has found the golden key—who knows and uses the knowledge that the treasures of Christmas happiness are reached through Christmas charity.

The whole of the Todd family woke up in a thoroughly Christmas state of mind, and the younger members (as might, perhaps, be expected, considering the nature of their dreams) with a perfectly ferocious appetite—two or three appetites each, indeed. Breakfast over, the junior branches were despatched, under the care of old Todd, to church, while Sister Milly remained at home, and devoted all her energies to the preparation of the anticipated banquet. I am inclined to think that Milly had never seen, much less cooked, such a dinner in her life; but cooks, like poets, are born not made; and with the aid of Miss Pinnifer, and the simultaneous use of all the fireplaces in the house, Milly got on splendidly, and astonished herself with her success. It was in a moment of confidence, engendered by the close and intimate relation in which they were thus placed, that Miss Pinnifer imparted to Milly a secret.

"Milly, my dear," said Miss Pinnifer, "I want your advice."

"Hadin't you better ask father?" said Milly, conceiving that his counsels would probably be of greater value than her own.

"No, my dear; no, I think not. In a case of—of this kind, I don't think he would be a judge. I want to know, dear, whether I look best in my black satin spencer and pink skirt, or in my Stuart tartan. Take time to consider, my dear."

"They're both very nice," said Milly. "The tartan for choice, I think."

"Do you, dear? Now I was thinking, dear, that the tartan was rather—rather—rather looking. One doesn't want to make one's self quite a middle-aged person, you know, dear."

"Of course not," said Milly; "but I always thought the tartan so very becoming. What makes you so particular to-day?"

"Well, dear, I really hardly know how to tell you. But we girls never can keep our little secrets, can we?"—the dear creature was fifty if she was a day—"the fact is—it's— it's on account of Mr. Brown, dear."

Milly looked at her inquiringly, but with a roguish twinkle in her eyes. The old lady continued—

"The object of Mr. Brown's coming, my dear, is, as you are aware, enveloped in mystery. He must have an object, you know, and I have reason to imagine—a strong reason, I may say—that that object is myself."

"You don't say so!" said Milly. "Pray accept my best congratulations. Has he declared his intentions?"

"Well, no, dear, I can't say he has exactly declared himself, in words at least; but if you had only seen how he looked—you couldn't mistake his impression, my dear. He looked at me with a positive smile, quite love-like, I assure you. And then he insisted on coming to my room."

"Now, dear, I'm sure I'm very pleased," said Milly. "We've all been puzzled to account for his wanting to come, and I dare say that's it. You won't forget old friends when you are a grand lady, will you?"

"I haven't accepted him yet, my dear," said Miss Pinnifer, "and I shan't, either, the first time of asking. It doesn't do for a girl to make herself too cheap. He'll have to be very attentive, I can tell him, if he expects to have any chance with me. O dear! O dear! he's beginning to burn!"

The last words referred to the turkey, which was under Miss Pinnifer's special care, and which she forthwith began to baste violently.

"I've had a good deal of attention in my time, you see, my dear, so perhaps I think the less of it on that account. It isn't to be expected, you know, with my experience, that I should be dazzled by a Mr. Brown. Isn't he fat, dear?"

"Is he?" said Milly; "I haven't seen him, you know."

"Not seen him?" said Miss Pinnifer. "What do you mean? My dear, I was speaking of the turkey."

"Oh!" said Milly.

The conversation was interrupted by the return of the party from church. The younger Todds were found considerably in the way of the cookery, till Milly bit on the happy expedient of sending them to the baker's to fetch the pig. Forthwith they departed, with pig

written plainly on their countenances, and raced all the way to the shop, upon the understanding that the tail should be the prize of the winner. Johnny, the eldest, as might have been expected, came in foremost, to the great grief and discouragement of his brothers, till he magnanimously promised them that they should have the tail after he had done with it. Rather more quickly than they had set out, the trio returned from the baker's Johnny and Tommy Todd, carrying the dish between them. Willy, the youngest, much wanted to carry the cover, but the more mature wisdom of Johnny suggested that perhaps the pig would keep hotter with it on; so Willy had to content himself with walking behind as near as possible, and sniffing the fragrance of the savory burden. When they reached home Mr. Brown had just arrived, and their father and Milly were endeavoring adequately to express their appreciation of the hamper. Mr. Brown seemed pleased by the interruption, and patting the boys' heads paternally, asked them if they were good boys. Johnny and Tommy, though a little abashed, answered manfully (with a view to sixpences) that they were, but Willy, who was of a nervous temperament, began to cry, and promised irrelevantly that he wouldn't do it again.

Dinner time speedily arrived, much to the satisfaction of everybody. A few minutes before the appointed hour came a young gentleman with a very stiff shirt collar and a rather bashful expression of countenance, whom Milly's blushes at once designated as Charley Collins. Almost before Charley had been formally introduced, Miss Pinnifer came upon the scene, dressed in the black satin spencer and pink muslin skirt, with little blue bows pinned on all over her, and leading by the hand a solemn individual whom she introduced in a tragical tone as "My brother." The individual thus alluded to did not trouble himself to salute the company, but dropped into the first chair in his way, and fixed his eyes with a strong glare upon Mr. Brown. The party arranged themselves round the table, and began to do full justice to the good cheer. For some time there was but little conversation, everybody being too busy employed to talk, when suddenly Miss Pinnifer's brother paused in the very act of conveying a large piece of turkey to his mouth, and pointing with his fork, and the morsel still on it, at Mr. Brown, said "Hollo!" Mr. Brown looked a little uncomfortable when Miss Pinnifer hastened to explain—"You'll excuse my brother, sir, he's of unsound mind." And then leaning over two of the little Todds, and seizing her brother by the collar of his coat, she shook him violently, and said in an impressive voice, "Robert, behave!" Whereupon Robert became much depressed, and sulkily meant to give up his dinner. After the excitement caused by this little incident had subsided, the dinner proceeded with great smoothness, and the little party, which at first had felt some little constraint, was rapidly unbending under the genial influence of the Christmas cheer. At last came the crowning glory, in the shape of the pudding. And such a pudding! It was the very largest-sized pudding within the memory of the oldest inhabitant; so big, indeed, that Milly couldn't bring it in herself, but had to ask Charley Collins to help her. And rich! I should rather think it was! It was a regular millionnaire of a pudding, Miss Pinnifer's brother again created a little confusion by insisting on eating pepper with it, and shedding tears when the crust was taken away from him; but when at last he was prevailed upon to try it without seasoning, he sent up his plate three times, from which I infer that he was by no means such an idiot as was generally supposed.

At last the dinner came to an end—and the party drew round the fire in a cosy semicircle, and set to work regularly to enjoy themselves. The kettle was put on the fire, the spirits and lemons and sugar were brought out, and Mr. Brown volunteered to brew some punch—which he did as though punch had been his daily drink from his youth up—and then, when everybody was served, the pipes and tobacco were brought out, and Mr. Brown called upon John Todd for a song. And John sang a song, and another and another after that, to the most tremendous applause, even the blackbird dropping his critical airs for once, and applauding as loudly as anybody. And then Mr. Brown sang a song; after which Charley Collins sang a song, which was a noble chorus, which was sung by the whole strength of the company with such good-will that the people next door couldn't bear themselves talk, and knocked at the wall with the poker as a gentle hint for peace and quietness; and Milly herself sang a song, and then Miss Pinnifer's brother murmured something which was understood to mean that he would also favor the company; but being asked the name of the song, he replied, after much consideration, "More Pudding." So to make up for his shortcomings Miss Pinnifer volunteered, and after repeating five times that she had a cold (which was true), and that she hadn't a note in her voice (which was false), she began, with intense expression, "Will you love me, then as now?" The direction of her glances made it quite a personal matter between herself and Mr. Brown, who should by every rule of propriety have sung his part. "Dearest, then I'll love thee more." But he didn't. Probably he didn't know the song, or still more probably, he wouldn't have sung it if he knew it.

As a slight protection against the too oppressive glances of Miss Pinnifer, Mr. Brown entered into conversation with Charley Collins, who had by this time got rid of his bashfulness, and appeared to really was, a light-hearted, manly young fellow. Charley had conceived a great liking to Mr. Brown, and was very confidential with him; so that Mr. Brown was speedily made aware that his young friend was a clerk at the moderate salary of eighteen shillings a week; that he had an offer of a situation where he could earn two offers, but that security to the amount of three hundred pounds was required, which put it out of the question. Charley Collins could not help a half sigh as he stated what might be, and yet could not be, and Mr. Brown could easily understand that the situation so temptingly offered, only to be performed refused, was that which would give Milly and her lover the start in life for which they were waiting.

The merriment by no means flagged as the evening wore on. Mr. Brown was the life and soul of the party, cracked jokes, asked riddles, told stories, kissed Milly and Miss Pinnifer under the mistletoe, and generally proved himself the prince of good fellows. Forfeits were played, and blind man's buff, at which latter game Miss Pinnifer gave rise to grave suspicions as to her fair play by persistently refusing to catch anybody but Mr. Brown, and holding him an unreasonably long time when caught. After blind man's buff, a dance was proposed, and carried out with great success, John Todd performing on the violin. Miss Pinnifer's brother had been rather gloomy during the previous amusements, but he now began to enjoy himself

immensely, dancing away by himself in the very middle of the room with a funeral expression of countenance, and occasionally tumbling over one or other of the young Todds, who had rather indolent notions of dancing, and were a good deal in the way. But he didn't mind, not he; he picked himself up and went at it again as if nothing had happened. One by one the dancers stopped, exhausted; and at last theiddle stopped, too; but Miss Pinnifer's brother still continued to dance, without any apparent intention of ever leaving off. Indeed, I think it highly probable that he would have continued dancing to this moment, had not his sister, by certain whispered blandishments, in which the word "pudding" was plainly audible, persuaded him to leave off, and finally got him to bed.

The youthful Todds about this time began to show signs of weariness, and were with some difficulty induced to retire to rest. Johnny Todd, with the inestimable pig's tail under his pillow. The remainder of the party gathered round the fire, and chatted quietly. Mr. Brown seemed to have suddenly grown silent since the children's departure. At last, after a pause in the conversation, he said suddenly—"Mr. Todd, I've a proposition to make to you. Don't go, Miss Milly—what I'm going to say concerns you too. This lady and gentleman are friends of the family, and I don't mind speaking before them. Mr. Todd, I'm not a young man—I've been knocked about a good deal in my time, and I mean, if I can, to have a little comfort in my old years. So I'm looking out for a wife, and I haven't seen any young lady so much to my liking as Miss Milly there."

At this startling announcement Milly turned red and pale by turns; Charley Collins clenched his fists, and looked unutterable things; and Miss Pinnifer became perfectly rigid, with only energy enough to turn up her eyes to the ceiling, and to murmur in heart-broken accents, "Cruel—kewerel man!"

John Todd attempted to speak, but Mr. Brown continued—

"Hear me out, please; and then give me what answer you like. I'm not a young man, as I said before, but I'm easy-going, and I believe I should make a good husband. I've worked hard in my time, but I have made twenty thousand pounds, and now I don't intend to work any more, but just to enjoy myself. My wife will have a good time of it, mind you. Balls, concerts, parties, if she likes 'em, she shall have 'em, and that's all about it. Now, Miss Milly, what do you say? Will you be an old man's darling?"

"Mr. Brown," John Todd began, but Milly interrupted.

"No, father, let me speak, Mr. Brown. I thank you for your offer, and I don't doubt it's kindly meant. I've given my heart away already (as you might have guessed to-night), and I can't give it twice."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Brown, sadly. "But it's weary waiting, Milly, all through the long years, and a boy-and-girl fancy soon dies away."

"Ours isn't a boy-and-girl fancy, then, Mr. Brown, for I'm quite sure it'll never die away. Never, never, never! Will it, Charley? Charley did not trust himself to speak, but a warm pressure of the hand answered Milly well enough.

"Don't decide in a hurry, Miss Milly. There are many things to think about, you know; your father, no? He oughtn't to work as hard as he does, but his eyes are failing already. Now, if you'll marry me, your father shall have a good house over his head, a nice little cottage in some quiet country place, and need never do a stitch of work again. And the boys shall have good schooling and a fair start in business. It's worth thinking of, my dear."

Poor Milly felt utterly miserable. She had not the smallest idea of wavering, but Mr. Brown had artfully contrived that by being faithful to her father's love she should appear to deprive her father and brother of a host of blessings, all of which was in her power to bestow. She could only sob out:

"It's very cruel, and burst into tears. John Todd had made repeated efforts to speak, but now he broke out in a tone that bore down all interruption—

"Mr. Brown, for the kindness we've received from you, I'm obliged; and I don't go from it. But I'm not obliged, sir, by your coming into my house, and trying to steal away my daughter's affections from a young man as truly loves her. It ain't fair, it ain't right, it ain't honorable. And when you go manly to work upon her feelings, and she's an old father, that she'd give her right hand for it's mean and cruel and cowardly, that's what it is. And I tell you what, sir—I wouldn't take another kindness at your hands, no, not if I was starving. I'm a creaky old man, sir, I know I am; and my sight's failing, as you say; but I've work in me yet, thank God, and I'll work my fingers to the bone before I'll bid a child of mine marry for money without love."

"And perhaps you'll let me say a word, Mr. Brown, interposed Charley Collins. "It ain't much, it's only a matter of opinion, and it'll relieve my mind. It's my opinion, sir, that you're a canting, two-faced, hypocritical old humbug!"

"I'll trouble you to say that over again presently, young man," said Mr. Brown, who seemed to recover his cheerfulness under abuse. "It might be useful, if I wanted a character, you know. Well, Mr. Todd, then that's your answer, is it?"

"It is so, sir," said John Todd, with great decision.

"And yours, Miss Milly?"

Milly's reply was of a rather remarkable description. She quietly turned round to Charley Collins, and put her arms round his neck.

"And yours, Miss Pinnifer, I beg pardon, I quite forgot I hadn't asked you a question." Miss Pinnifer looked as if she wished he had.

"Well," said Mr. Brown, "after all, perhaps it's just as well as it is; and I've had the satisfaction of making my own acquaintance from a totally new point of view. I really had no idea I was such a very unpleasant person. Let me see now, I'm mean, and I'm cruel, and I'm cowardly. That's Mr. Todd's idea. Mr. Collins says in a hypocritical, canting, double-faced—dear me, what was it he topped up with?"

"Humbug," said Charley, boldly.

"Old humbug," corrected Mr. Brown, sternly. "I'm not going to let you